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PA/HO Department of State
E.O. 12958, as amended
August 6, 2007

NSSM 132 - Soviet Proposal for
Five-Power Nuclear Conference

Analytical Summary

I. BACKGROUND

Moscow's advocacy of a conference of the five nuclear powers received fresh impetus from Brezhnev's CPSU Congress speech of March 30, 1971, which opened a period of increased activity in Soviet disarmament policy. The proposal was one among several vehicles in Brezhnev's program for Moscow to play the role of champion in the disarmament field, and author of new initiatives in that field.

II. POSITIONS OF THE FIVE POWERS

USSR.

-- The Soviet statement asserted that such a conference should examine "the questions of nuclear disarmament as a whole". An agreement resulting from negotiations "could encompass both the entire complex of measures in nuclear disarmament and partial measures gradually leading to that goal".

-- The Soviet statement further proposed the beginning, through diplomatic channels, of an exchange of views on questions pertaining to the timing of the conference, its venue, and its agenda and procedure.

-- The statement also said that the Soviet Government did not object to establishment of a preparatory committee for the convening of the conference.

US.

The US response to date has been cautious and conditional, but not negative. In his statement at the opening of the summer session of the CCD on June 29, Ambassador Leonard said that the US would welcome the participation of all nuclear weapons states in nuclear arms control and disarmament efforts in a manner acceptable to all of those states and in a manner reflecting the interest and concerns of non-nuclear weapon states as well.

Finally, the US is now considering an initial, conditional, oral reply to the USSR, already discussed with the UK, France and other allies. It would state that:

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- (a) US is studying the Soviet proposal and will be prepared later to give a formal reply;
- (b) The US considers the subject raised by the USSR as worthy of serious consideration;
- (c) Conference would require careful preparation of the consensus of all five powers on what measures were feasible for discussion;
- (d) There should be no prejudice to SALT;
- (e) The US presupposes that all five powers would be willing to attend such a conference; and
- (f) We understand as implicit in the proposal that the interest and concerns of non-nuclear states should be taken into account in considering ways to make progress on arms control measures.

China

Chinese have shown no interest in playing up the fact of PRC membership in the nuclear club. Also, they have not been willing to participate in arms control efforts. Presumably they believe that participation in disarmament negotiations could lead to pressure on China to agree to a nuclear test ban or other measures which would inhibit its efforts to achieve eventually a credible nuclear deterrent against both Moscow and Washington. In a more general sense, the Chinese are suspicious of any proposals emanating from the USSR.

The Chinese have not turned down the Soviet proposal, the odds seem likely that they will reject it, if indeed they respond at all.

UK

The UK now has under consideration an interim reply which would indicate interest in Soviet proposal, in this context would elicit Soviet views, i. e., possible agenda. In line with or very similar to our proposed oral reply.

France

The French Government has publicly accepted the Soviet proposal. The French view, however, appears to be that the main Soviet aim for the proposal is to embarrass and isolate the Chinese.

III. ADVANTAGES AND DISADVANTAGES

Soviet motives.

Soviet motives are probably mixed.

-- They can score a propaganda gain by advancing the idea so as to enhance the peaceful image which they seek to portray.

-- Second, the Soviets may count on the Chinese rejecting it. If so, this could serve their purpose of isolating the Chinese.

-- On the other hand, should a conference be held, the Soviets might view it as a device for bringing pressure on Chinese nuclear programs, and perhaps those of France and the UK.

Disadvantages

The superficial propagandistic element is an obvious potential disadvantage for us. However, we can neutralize this to some extent at least by taking a cautiously positive attitude toward it, which has characterized our approach to date.

Possible disadvantage for us could be the possible adverse impact of the proposal on US efforts gradually to improve relations with the PRC. We should, therefore, bear in mind when we have the chance to cooperate with the Soviets on practical matters where our interests coincide, that the Chinese may view and publicly condemn such steps as big power collusion.

We would thus want to avoid the impression of colluding with the Soviet Union to embarrass or isolate the Chinese by a premature acceptance of the Soviet proposal, particularly, in view of its insubstantial nature and unforeseeable results. Another way to handle proposal would be to make clear the prior condition that such a conference would require participation of all five powers. It is possible that high-level private assurances from us would be of some help in allaying Chinese suspicions.

Another disadvantage is that some of the allies (for example, Germany and Japan) may be suspicious of the proposal and feel that, although they are not nuclear powers, they have deep security interest in matters of nuclear disarmament. An implication of a nuclear power condominium is neither helpful nor healthy, but may be difficult to avoid -- to some degree -- especially, in any conference which is held. By accepting the Soviet proposal, we might also arouse the concern of the non-nuclear members of the CCD who might feel that a five power conference would degrade the importance of this established disarmament body. Frank consultations would go far toward relieving their concerns.

Perhaps most important, it is not at all certain that a satisfactory agenda acceptable to all parties could be worked out. Even if we are able to clarify Soviet views prior to a conference, this is no guarantee that these would be acceptable to us or to the other nuclear powers, and serve a useful purpose, or that other proposals would meet these criteria, given the wide disparity in the nuclear weapons arsenals of the nuclear states and other disparate interests. No conference would be better than one with ill-defined or unclear purposes which could arouse acrimony and lock us into an activity which might not serve our interests.

There are some potential virtues in the Soviet proposal if all powers could agree to a reasonable agenda. (1) SALT cannot deal with third-country nuclear interests, and the CCD would seem to have too many members for useful consideration of matters relating to central nuclear arms control. (2) It appears to be in our long-term interest to engage the PRC, to the extent possible, in serious discussion of arms control.

(Comment: If, as the study indicates, Soviet motives are largely propagandistic or anti-Chinese, then it is a fair question what interest the US could have in pursuing this Soviet initiative. As the section listing advantages and disadvantages also indicates, perhaps the only virtue for the US is to establish a formal or semi-permanent "channel" for the Chinese to participate in "disarmament.")

This, however, raises a more fundamental question of whether disarmament/arms control is, in fact, a starting point for broader, multilateral negotiations with the Chinese.

It is almost an article of faith in arms control theology that all nuclear powers must perforce share common interests. Maybe they do, historically, but the disparities in actual power suggest that the immediate interests of each nuclear power are not paralld.

The study suggests that the Chinese can only regard a nuclear club with suspicion, not only because of their patent inferiority in the nuclear field, but also because, politically, Peking finds it more profitable to remain aligned with the "have-nots" as a bloc.

In other words, until the Chinese have some more direct interest in either establishing their Nuclear Power Credentials or, perhaps, advancing their own particular arms control proposals, then using arms control as a vehicle for a dialogue with the Chinese may in fact be self defeating (and playing the Soviet game).

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Another complicating aspect of this general idea of five power interests is that we have an adversary relationship with the USSR and China, and an alliance relationship with France and the UK. If and when five power forums, proposals, etc., gather momentum, they inject the Soviets into these alliance relationships, perhaps only indirectly at first. Since the Soviets no longer have a similar alliance relationship with China to concern them, this gives them a rather free hand to meddle in a wide variety of affairs that affect nuclear powers. At the same time, it restricts our freedom of action, especially because of our special relationship to the UK.

Thus one can foresee that however desirable it may appear to explore the five power approach as one convenient way of drawing in China, we may pay a price in terms of our allies.

In sum, the disparities between the US and USSR, on the one hand, and the other three on the other hand, seem to militate against perserving the nuclear status quo through arms control. But to the extent we try to do this, perhaps as Chinese capabilities grow to a point where they are interested, we may have to sacrifice some aspects of cooperation with the UK and France. And this point might be reached at some point in this decade when our interests in a European Defense arrangement will be growing.

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IV. POSSIBLE TOPICS FOR FIVE POWER CONFERENCEDECLASSIFIED
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The Soviets have not indicated what subjects might be addressed at such a conference.

To the extent the Soviets have considered possible topics, these could include pressing for adherence to past agreements (the LTBT, the NPT and the Seabeds Treaty) in order to isolate the PRC, but pursuit of this line would also impact adversely on Soviet-French relations. The Soviets might also wish to urge a Comprehensive Test Ban -- particularly if they do not want one.

It is also possible that the Soviets would be interested in proposing some kind of freeze on strategic systems once a reasonably comprehensive agreement had been reached in SALT. Because of the inequities they would see as involved, a freeze proposal would meet firm opposition from the PRC and France.

While the Soviets may have no real interest in a proposal on no-first-use of nuclear weapons involving the PRC, they might feel compelled to put this idea on the table because of their traditional support for such a measure.

If the PRC accepts the idea of a five-power conference, it would be likely to advance broad and sweeping proposals, at least in part designed to enhance its image with non-nuclear and non-aligned countries: for a no-first-use undertaking and for the abolition of all nuclear weapons.

The French have given no indication of topics they wish to be discussed at such a conference.

We might wish to consider the following items as potential:

1. Measures to avoid and reduce the risk of accidental nuclear war.
It might be possible to reach an agreement on this subject along the lines of, and supplementing, the bilateral US-USSR agreement being considered in SALT. So as not to conflict with the on-going SALT negotiations, one way would be to use an agreement which had already been concluded between the US and USSR in SALT as a rough model for a multilateral agreement, tailored to meet the circumstances of five powers.

2. Expanded "hot line" communications between nuclear powers.
This subject of interest to all five nuclear powers. It does, however, have political connotations both in regard to official contacts between the PRC and the US, and in giving a further impression of a nuclear power directorate.

3. A proposal in the field of security assurances. Such a proposal might draw upon the proposals the US advanced in connection with the NPT or be cast in terms of more generalized non-use of force declarations.

-- Might serve to reassure non-Communist Asian countries and act as disincentive to proliferation.

-- The language of a proposal on security assurances, were we to advance one, would be critical in protecting our interest in maintaining deterrence against aggression and blackmail by the conventional forces of the USSR, the PRC and their allies. OSD and JCS oppose this as potential agenda item.

4. A five-power declaration to support the principle of the non-proliferation of nuclear weapons. A more tactful way of trying to get France and the PRC to act in accordance with the NPT, without insisting that they sign an agreement they had not negotiated. The French have already stated that this is their policy, and it is conceivable that the PRC might be willing to do so as well.

5. A proposal not to deploy further ABM systems. Such a proposal would prevent the UK, France and the PRC from acquiring any ABMs, while the US and USSR would deploy limited ABMs in accordance with whatever agreement is reached in SALT. If the US and USSR were prepared to accept zero ABMs, it might have wider appeal. It would have the advantage of codifying acceptance of a deterrent strategy by all the nuclear powers. (OSD and JCS believe this is not serious or appropriate.)

6. Limitation on strategic offensive forces. For completeness this topic is included, even though it is highly unlikely that the five powers could agree on a common basis for considering offensive force limitations in the near term. (OSD and JCS would oppose this.)

(Comment: This is a rather unimpressive shopping list, which merely points up that there is little that is likely to be appealing to all of the nuclear powers.)

Of the six subjects, limits on strategic offensive is a non-starter, obviously. No first use is violently opposed within this government because it undercuts the basic thesis of "flexible response" and, some would argue, weakens deterrence. A generalized non-first-use in the guise of a security assurance runs into the same opposition; moreover, it is difficult to see what we would gain by it.

This leaves as semi-serious possibilities: (1) accidental war measures, (2) hot line, (3) ABMs and (4) non-proliferation.

-- ABMs is a remote question for the lesser nuclear powers, nevertheless, as the study points out, it could have the effect of codifying assured destruction strategies -- and therefore could have some interest to China, France and the UK. It is only workable if we have a complete ABM ban in SALT.

-- Non-proliferation runs directly against current Chinese ideological claims; realistically, however, it is highly unlikely that any of the nuclear powers will assist non-nuclear states to create capability. Codifying this, however, is a political matter that turns on the Chinese willingness to be aligned with the nuclear powers against the non-nuclears.

-- As practical matters the hot line and accidental war are probably the only two items that might survive preliminary negotiation. The prevention of accidental war is sufficiently anodyne that a five power agreement might emerge. It has the disadvantage for China and France of originating out of US-Soviet dialogue. If we conclude that this could be a vehicle for a five power conversation, then the agreement as currently written ("other situations", etc.) will be anathema to China, since Peking would quite rightly see an invitation for Soviet meddling and interference in the omnibus clause we have now in SALT.

One area of nuclear arms control not considered, but likely to arise might be limits on operational areas of nuclear forces, withdrawal of bases, or denuclearization of specific areas -- all of these at one time part of the Chinese or Soviet arms control litany.

Another contingency, not discussed, but worth remembering is that China could propose that the five powers join in urging a world wide disarmament conference. This also happens to be on the Brezhnev peace program, and some Soviets have hinted that if the Chinese move this way the Soviets would go along.

In any case, since the conference is a Soviet initiative, the burden for devising an agenda might be best left to Moscow to suggest, at least initially. This review, however, suggests that most proposals either are outrageously unfair or are mere propaganda. There does not seem to be much in the way of common ground.

V. ALTERNATIVE APPROACHES

The alternatives have here been narrowed down to a handful of broad possibilities in order to reduce the problem to its essentials.

All the approaches presuppose that we have had thorough consultations with the UK and France, as well as with other NATO allies, other interested allies such as Japan, and possibly with the non-nuclear members of the CCD.

We should bear in mind that in practical terms we may have less than full freedom of action.

-- The US would be hard put to reject a disarmament conference which all the other nuclear powers have agreed to. Thus, the PRC, in one sense, would have an impact on how the US responds to the Soviet proposal. The PRC might choose to delay its response or not to respond at all, or to propose, perhaps, a wider meeting. In that event, we might face quite a different problem. A number of important states might at least want to explore the idea. It would seem contrary to US interests to undercut the CCD, both as a general proposition, and specifically with respect to the Co-Chairmanship institution.

Another point to bear in mind is that regardless of the amount of true consultation and exchange we have with non-nuclear states (allied and otherwise), we may still face serious reservations about a five-power conference. A five-power conference, contrary to the concept of SALT, would tend to show that simply becoming a nuclear power, no matter how insignificant, entitled a country to a special status.

The Study deals with six alternatives.

1. Reject the proposal, regardless of acceptance by others;
2. Accept on condition that all other nuclear powers agree and reasonable agenda could be agreed;
3. Accept with only precondition that all others agree;
4. Accept even if Chinese do not accept (i. e., 4-power conference);
5. Make counterproposal for initial conference of experts to exploration of one question, e. g., measures to guard against accidental nuclear war, including Hot Line;
6. Avoid so long a feasible accepting or rejecting and stand on initial reply (as proposed by State in first section of study, above).

(Comment: Alternatives 1 (reject) and 4 (accept) are presumably beyond the pale. The only difference between 2 and 3 is whether precondition of an acceptable agenda should be posed. Alternative 5 is a variant, in which we take an active role, preempting agenda, and press for a conference ourselves (essentially an anti-Chinese move, if Peking in fact opposes concept of five power conference). Alternative 6 would be a decision to make no decision, but at the same time, not precluding alternatives 2, 3, or even 4.)

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Following are the principal arguments presented in the study concerning alternative 2 and 3:

-- Posing preconditions of agreement by all nuclear powers and agreement to a reasonable agenda avoids onus for rejection, avoids playing game of isolating China, and provides some assurance that conference might lead to tangible results.

-- Insisting on "reasonable" agenda, however, might put it in position of obstructionists; if all agreed to conference would we want to hold out for agreement to agenda?

-- Starting with both preconditions and falling off the condition of agreed agenda would be a middle ground.

Alternative (5) of proposing an "experts meeting" on single subject (accidental war).

-- Attempts to rule out extraneous political gambits, might appeal more to Chinese, might have a fair chance of a useful outcome, and non-nuclear powers might find this approach more reassuring.

-- However, introduction of this approach prior to SALT might undermine real prospects for agreement on accidental war, for ephemerial prospects in five power meeting (this approach could await successful conclusion of SALT).

(Comment: Even these narrower approaches, however, might raise Chinese suspicions, particularly since our single agenda item would be already defined to large extent by US-Soviet negotiations in SALT.)

Alternative 6 -- avoiding definitive response, standing on interim reply.

-- Avoids burden of trying to define agenda at this time and is in line with UK and not inconsistent with French.

-- Provides greater protection than conditional acceptance against USSR maneuvers against Peking.

-- The pitfall is that in further probing by USSR, Soviets can put us in position from which it would be difficult eventually to refuse conference.

-- Soviets would try to narrow our freedom of action on agenda, venue, timing etc.

(Comment: If we do not want to reject the conference out of hand, we must unconditionally, and if we do not want to take an initiative (for an experts meeting), then essentially we have only two choices:

1. Accept conditionally, beginning with most desirable conditions of agreement to a conference by all concerned and prior agreement on agenda, but be prepared to give up haggling over agenda if we are the only holdout;

2. Stall, by giving the Soviets a mildly positive response but without commitments.

Main criteria for choosing is what nuance in our relations with China and the USSR we want to convey.

-- If we want to seem more encouraging to the USSR, a conditional acceptance would be the route to follow.

-- If we want to allow for the Chinese to reject, or avoid seeming to put them under any pressures, then logical choice would be to provide interim reply and stall. Presumably we would want to inform the Chinese of our interim reply and your intention not to pursue the matter in any active way.